

Tennessee Boat School: Building Boats and Memories

BY DEBI AND KARL WEINERT, DIXIELAND CHAPTER

When Karl Weinert was just twelve-years old, he nailed saw horses to the dining room floor and built a skiff with his dad and siblings. Today, Karl is a master boatwright. That boat brought the family a lot of memories and enjoyment for over twenty years and started his life-long love of boatbuilding. Now he's helping other families have that kind of experience by teaching them how to build and float a boat in just two days at the Tennessee Boat School in Big Sandy, Tennessee.

People come from all corners of the country to work under Karl's instruction. Here, they have a chance to connect with themselves and family members, learning new talents while building something worthwhile. Multi-generational families arrive; everyone hammers on the boat, they get covered head-to-toe in glue and kids (young and old) witness their parents learning from someone else. Hidden talents begin to emerge and skills develop that would have gone undetected for years without this hands-on experience.

What Karl and Debi Weinert are really offering families is a chance to have a practical experience by building something—a boat—they can be proud of. A bond grows between the crew that will remain strong for years to come, because each time they look at that boat they can relive the memory and their sense of pride will shine through. Most people admit they've always wanted to build a wooden boat but they would never attempt it alone. At the Tennessee Boat School, the mantra is "I built a boat!" They can feel confident under our instruction they will finish and that boat will float. Guaranteed.



Putting hand tools back in the crew's hands—especially kids—is the key to making these alternative vacations successful. Many kids come who have never seen a hand plane, don't know that a folding ruler folds, and who can't read a ruler. Some families don't have tools, so how would their children know what any of these things are? Often parents (even parents of grown children) have dreamed of building things with their kids and always wanted to provide the experience—but time just got away. So teams young and old are building boats and making their own history.

When the people arrive at boat school, sometimes it's father and son or daughter, other times it's grandparents, grown kids and their kids—tri-generational boat building. We see more and more of this



happening! It's never too late to start the memories.

As the day unfolds, the boats begin to take shape. You hear the crews banging hammers, pounding away, then later the quiet whir of the hand planes slicing across the wood, taking off the slightest of slivers. There is a rhythm that develops, people talking, big smiles everywhere. Karl tosses in nautical terms, naming each part of the boat and soon the pride of building their own boat is mounting. It is not easy to build a boat in two days, but with kits, which are minimally prepared in advance by Karl, the teams can focus on helping each other and having a grand time building their own boat!

These are the days of tech-tronics, video games and computers, so we have to seek out opportunities where kids can work outdoors, learn team work, practice patience, experience building something with their hands, use the old-fashioned tools of yesteryear, and learn new vocabulary. Because, whether they have a career as a craftsman, a manager, lawyer or doctor, they'll be better at their job knowing what the other guy does and what's involved.

Our road to the Tennessee Boat School began several years ago in Pompano Beach, Florida, where Karl was a master boatwright building the finest yachts in the world, all by hand, at Merritt's. But when they switched from wood to fiberglass, it was time to do something else. With so much changing in Florida we looked at moving to a more peaceful area and bought a small 22-acre farm near Gainesville, where we lived for five years. We learned about fencing, cows, sheep, goats, tree plantations. And we were introduced to a new concept—agri-entertainment—bringing people from the city to the country so they can see how great life can be. Simultaneously, a friend was interested in building a small boat. Karl had a seven-day boat he thought the guy would like. The boat took three weeks to finish. We knew we had something but we had to tweak it. At this point we began to think of moving to a more temperate climate.

Shortly after that, we found a farm we loved in Big Sandy, Tennessee. We tamed the farm, did the fencing, bought the cows, built the boat barn...and we were ready for customers. But the customers we were used to really aren't in this area—so we had to do something else to attract people. We began revisiting the idea of agri-entertainment: taking the farm experience, our beautiful ten-acre pond, and coupling it with an experienced boat builder. People were always asking to work alongside Karl, or were simply raved about his talents—maybe we could make something unique out of all this.

So after much searching I happened upon the *Wooden Boat* magazine website, and read about their family boatbuilding—once a year wooden boatbuilding which happens all over the world. They were promoting exactly what we wanted to do. If only Karl hadn't